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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001441

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: FINNISH DIPLOMAT OFFERS VIEWS ON SYRIAN
POLICY TOWARD LEBANON

REF: A. HELSINKI 710

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 1420

Classified By: DCM William Grant for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) A visiting Finnish diplomat from Damascus sees Syria as pursuing a policy of "constructive chaos" in Lebanon, and views its motives for supporting an EU-proposed border mission as suspect. He perceives cracks in the Syrian regime that suggest its lifespan is limited, and advocated targeted sanctions against key Syrian officials as the best way to modify the SARG's behavior. Finally, he believes a weak consensus president (ruling out Free Patriotic Movement leader General Michel Aoun) is the best way to consolidate Lebanon's struggling democratic process, in part because such a candidate would not be perceived by Syria as a threat and most likely avoid its negative reaction to his candidacy.
End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Pol/Econ Chief and PolMilOff met, at his request, with Anssi Kullberg, Second Secretary at the Embassy of Finland in Damascus, on September 18. Kullberg, a historian by training, is responsible for Lebanon in the absence of a Finnish embassy in Beirut and travels here frequently.

SYRIA: PURSUING CONSTRUCTIVE CHAOS IN LEBANON

[1](#)3. (C) In Kullberg's opinion, Syria does not want to ferment complete political chaos in Lebanon. He felt that Syria could ill afford to have a political meltdown that would lead to civil or a Sunni-Shia conflict in Lebanon. Syria needs a stable, but frightened, Lebanon to maintain its influence in the country. If Syria truly wanted civil war in Lebanon, he argued, it would already have begun.

[1](#)4. (C) Rather, Syria wants to keep Lebanon on the "brink" of chaos. He noted that, while Damascus often accuses the US of promoting "constructive chaos" in the region, in reality this is Syria's policy toward Lebanon. In the SARG's eyes, a pro-Syrian president would obviate the need for Syria's military to return to Lebanon.

QUESTIONABLE SYRIAN MOTIVES ON EU BORDER INITIATIVE

¶5. (C) Kullberg said Finland is favorable to the recent EU proposal (reftels) for an international border mission, but skeptical about Syria's motives. In his opinion, this latest EU endeavor to address Lebanon-Syria border security was the result of FM Moratinos' recent visit to Lebanon and Syria. In the past, Syria was only willing to meet with EU countries on a bilateral basis, in an obvious divide and conquer strategy that had mostly failed (Kullberg cited Italy and Germany as countries that had rebuffed these attempts), but now Syria had changed tactics and was targeting the EU as whole.

¶6. (C) Kullberg stated that within the EU, skepticism is high about Syria's true intentions in showing interest in any border security program. He added that expanding the German Pilot program, currently being implemented on the northern Lebanon-Syria border, might be best vehicle to improving border security on the more contested eastern border, though so far it has been ineffective in stopping arms from crossing the border.

CRACKS IN THE SYRIAN REGIME

¶7. (C) Kullberg said "cracks" in the Syrian regime already were apparent, due to what he termed "three springs": 1) Damascus 2000 following the death of Hafez Asad; 2) the 2004 Kurdish uprising in Damascus; and 3) the 2005 Beirut spring. There is general popular discontent with the regime; individual Syrians live under the constant fear of the "mukharabat" (Syrian intelligence), not necessarily for political reasons; often it is a case of one individual using

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his "wasta" (connections) with the intelligence services to avenge an alleged personal wrongdoing. Furthermore, Syrians are not happy with Damascus' alliance with Iran; many believe it led to the November 2006 crackdown on Sunni's affiliated with the Hariri family. As a result, Kullberg did not envision a long lifespan for the SARG.

¶8. (C) The regime, meanwhile, is determined to prevent different groups from unifying, as the recent arrest of seven Syria members of the Syrian Youth for Justice demonstrates. The seven, arrested for establishing an internet forum for democratic participation, are of mixed religious backgrounds. Were they all from the same group, Kullberg said, the SARG would not feel threatened; it is the collaboration of individuals from different backgrounds that scares them.

HOW TO ISOLATE SYRIA

¶9. (C) Kullberg felt that modifying Syria's behavior requires better western efforts to isolate the regime. EU countries in particular continue to conduct business with Syria despite economic sanctions. Furthermore, the Syrian economy is growing and Asad's regime has become more confident, if not cocky, and resistant to western pressure. He credited Syria's "surprisingly good" economic performance with the government's efforts to liberalize the economy (following the Chinese model, keeping a tight grip on the political regime), the high price of oil, increased foreign investment diverted from Lebanon (especially from the Gulf), little dependence on imports from the EU (and thus sheltered from the effects of a high Euro), and the repatriation of money from Syrians abroad.

¶10. (C) Kullberg thought "targeted sanctions" against elite individuals inside the regime, especially in the intelligence services, would be the most effective way to change the SARG's behavior. Sanctions denying visas to certain government officials, and especially to their children who attend US and European universities, would send a strong message. Also, freezing the foreign assets of these

individuals was another way of securing compliant behavior. Kullberg admitted that such targeted sanctions would require compiling detail information that could withstand the legal scrutiny in the US and Europe, but emphasized that such sanctions could be the most effective way of dealing with a recalcitrant Syria regime that seems unwilling to change.

¶11. (C) Asked about recent statements by EU parliamentarians who visited Damascus advocating the signing of an EU Association Agreement with Syria, Kullberg said the agreement was still "frozen." While EU members had an economic incentive to conclude the agreement, Damascus' motivation was purely political, since it was not dependent on EU investment. Kullberg added that credible "carrots," such as France's offers to engage with Syria should it refrain from interfering in the Lebanese presidential election, were useful. Pol/Econ Chief noted that Syria needs to change its behavior first, to which Kullberg readily agreed.

WEAK CONSENSUS PRESIDENT BEST WAY TO PROMOTE LEBANON'S
FRAGILE DEMOCRACY

¶12. (C) Kullberg, showing his historian background, offered a unique opinion on the Lebanese presidential race. He advocated what he called a "weak consensus" president as the way forward in breaking the current Lebanese political deadlock, citing Georgia, Ukraine, and Latvia as examples of emerging democracies where this had been effective. He explained that while Lebanon has many pressing political issues, such as disarming Hizballah, proceeding with the Special Tribunal, and dealing with Syrian intervention, electing a consensus president was "key to unlocking the door" to the next phase in the political cycle and bringing political stability to Lebanon. He felt a consensus candidate, not directly affiliated with either March 14 or March 8, was the best option and, in his opinion, would not be seen as a "political defeat" to either camp. Such a candidate would be an "acceptable" alternative to both sides.

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Kullberg added that such a non-partisan consensus candidate would not be perceived by Syria as a threat and most likely avoid its negative reaction to his candidacy.

¶13. (C) Kullberg also thought that such a consensus presidential candidate would be a plus to the fledgling democratic institutions that have taken root since the Cedar revolution in 2005. He felt that if a strong-minded "autocratic" president were to get elected, it would set back the fragile democratic progress that has been made over the last two years. What was needed was a low-profile technocrat that could guide the country along a calm path and be above the political fray. This would give Lebanon a chance to get used to democracy, a process he felt would take 10 to 15 years. A candidate from outside Lebanon without a domestic constituency or unsavory political past, like the example of Karzai in Afghanistan, would be a good choice, he suggested.

¶14. (C) Kullberg said Free Patriotic Movement leader General Michel Aoun was an example of a president who would be too strong. Though the Christians need strong leadership, Aoun's platform was "hollow" and based too much on personality, and the FPM was driven by opportunistic motives that would not provide the country with the leadership it needs.

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